

THE LIBERALS WHO HAVEN'T LEARNED

Why the Soviet Illusion Still Lingers

GRANVILLE HICKS

LAST December the *Nation* celebrated its eighty-fifth birthday by publishing an outsize issue of the sort that has become almost obligatory for such occasions. Many prominent persons, including the President of the United States and a variety of politicians, labor leaders, and publicists, furnished congratulatory messages, and more than fifty men and women—college presidents, authors, clergymen, and so on—were listed as sponsors. Labor and philanthropic organizations, business firms, and individuals took advertising in which to express their good wishes to the magazine. When one examines the contents, however, one wonders what is being celebrated and who is doing the celebrating. For the issue, which is devoted to the problem of negotiating peace with Russia, may well serve in its total effect—however high-minded the intention and in spite of various articles that take a contrary position—as a piece of special pleading. There is a pro-Soviet bias in enough of the twenty-five articles to color the entire issue.

The existence at this moment of our his-

THE problem of counteracting Soviet influence in this country is confused by the fact that the chief sources of political and cultural muddle-headedness are less the Communists than the fellow-travelers, and even more than either, those who, without being actual fellow-travelers, yet seem to nurture a tender solicitude for the interests of the Soviet Union and its political and cultural friends. GRANVILLE HICKS here examines this puzzling modern phenomenon of a brand of liberalism that finds itself in effect apologizing for a movement whose oft-proclaimed first task is to destroy liberalism. Mr. Hicks was born in New Hampshire in 1901 and is a graduate of Harvard. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Great Tradition* (1933), *Figures of Transition* (1939), *The First to Awaken* (1940), and *Small Town* (1946).

tory of pro-Russian sentiment among persons who call themselves liberals presents an interesting problem, which I intend to discuss. But first I had better explain and substantiate my charge of bias. The question is not whether peace should be negotiated or not. I myself am far from agreeing with those Americans who take it for granted that war with Russia is inevitable and oppose negotiation under any circumstances or on any terms. Nor is the question whether critics of our foreign policy have the right to speak out. Of course they do. The question is whether the account of the Russian-American situation given in the *Nation* corresponds to the facts or is distorted by preconceptions. I believe that we have here in the anniversary issue of the *Nation* views of Russia and of America so biased that, if they were widely held, they would seriously weaken this country either in the maintenance of peace or the waging of war.

The point cannot be proven without some tedious summaries and restatements, but let us get on with the chore. We can begin appropriately with the article by the *Nation's* editor, Freda Kirchwey. Speaking of Korea, she says: "That the North's attack was an 'aggression' is disputed only by Communists and their backers. It was an aggression because the Thirty-eighth Parallel, agreed upon by the occupying powers, was also recognized de facto by both Korean regimes. It was an accepted boundary, crossed by the northern army in force." With its quotation marks around "aggression" and its legalistic terminology, this is scarcely a forthright statement. Even so, the next word, inevitably, is "but." "But to say this and nothing more is again to blur meanings. For the attack was more than an aggression; it was also an act of civil war and revolution."

It turns out that in Miss Kirchwey's mind

any Russian aggression is an act of revolution. "The important fact," she writes, "is that, whatever Russia's ultimate purposes may be, *its interests are promoted rather than interfered with by revolutionary change.* [Her italics.] With no stake in the survival of free enterprise, it can consolidate its power in the very process of satisfying the most urgent social and economic desires of the majority. Those who get hurt are the few, especially in countries like Korea, with primitive standards of living and of political action."

Doubtless there is some truth in this: Communism continues to appeal to the exploited and oppressed, those to whom any change seems likely to be beneficial, and it has often introduced reforms, particularly in the ownership of land, that have in fact benefited large numbers of people. But Russia does not rely on the democratic support of the majority to consolidate its power, nor do such reforms for long survive the appetite for absolute power of the Soviet bureaucracy. It is concerned neither with economic security nor with any of the more fundamental freedoms, but with its own domination, relying wholly on force, as currently in Czechoslovakia, liquidating not only the leaders of the bourgeoisie but also those Communists who are not entirely subservient to Moscow. Its agents, its spies, even its generals—as in Poland and Hungary—take over the country its "revolution" has conquered, and proceed to loot the economy, depress the standard of living, render impotent the trade union movement, and prohibit all economic and social protest. To say none of this, to talk as if Russian expansion were principally a matter of "satisfying the most urgent social and economic desires of the majority," is to give a false picture.

YET Miss Kirchwey suggests that Russia, whatever its faults, is on the side of revolution, while the United States, it is equally clear to her, is actually or potentially on the side of reaction, and is concerned exclusively with the dogma of "free enterprise." Hence she views with suspicion any such American

act as that involved in the intervention in Korea. She admits, as we have seen, that the invasion of South Korea was an act of aggression. She also admits that the prompt action taken by the United States and the United Nations raised the prestige of both. But she has her misgivings, which she places in the mouths of "many leaders of non-Communist countries": "They realized that a precedent might be in the making which could later be used to justify UN sanctions in case of rebellion—described as Russian-inspired—against a colonial power or an oppressive national regime." Again one can see that this might possibly be a danger in some speculative future, but it was certainly not the real and present danger that loomed so large last June, and about which one might have expected Miss Kirchwey to be properly anxious. The UN might conceivably be used to suppress a righteous colonial revolt—many things are conceivable. But Russia *did* in fact launch North Korea into an aggressive war.

Miss Kirchwey has a series of imperatives: "We must accept revolution as the dominant, inescapable fact of our time. . . . We must become, and quickly, the new sponsor of revolution, helping the peoples of the world to win all that communism promises or provides—plus liberty. . . . We must, if we are to seize a chance which may indeed be the last, rediscover our democratic beliefs, lost somewhere in the compromises of these years of shifting expediencies." That is the way Miss Kirchwey sees the world: a Russia riding the wave of inevitable revolution, opposed by a United States that has lost its democratic beliefs and processes.

J. Alvarez del Vayo, the *Nation's* foreign editor, is also a habitual skeptic so far as American policy is concerned. I remember an article that he wrote from Paris last summer, soon after the invasion of South Korea. Quoting "very intelligent observers" and other "authorities on international affairs," he first dwelt on the inefficiency and corruption of the government of South Korea and then referred to "grave doubts about the wisdom of America's 'letting itself be maneu-

vered into an untenable position' or 'allowing itself to be bled white in Korea,' two favorite expressions." The moral was clear: South Korea couldn't be saved, and it wasn't worth saving anyhow. Somehow or other, the question of the North Korean regime—its inefficiency, its corruption, its bloody despotism—never was raised.

In the anniversary issue Mr. del Vayo employs a similar logic in talking about Germany. He argues, first, that the West is at least as much responsible as Russia for the German situation: "The fact is the Potsdam agreement was whittled away, bit by bit, by both sides; the initial breaches cannot be attributed solely to the Russians." He then points out that rearming Germany is dangerous business: "the prospect of a rearmed Germany allied with the West may precipitate rather than prevent Russian attack." And, because of Russia's pacific intentions, rearming is unnecessary: "The problem of Germany would appear hopeless but for certain indications that Russia wants to find a solution." In other words, the threat to peace comes primarily from the United States, the hope for peace primarily from Russia.

Carolus, the *Nation's* pseudonymous correspondent in West Germany, tries even harder than del Vayo to frighten his readers. "Viewed in this light," he writes, "the question fails to remain as naive or simple as Washington would make it seem: 'Is Europe to become Bolshevized and Russianized?' No, indeed! Moscow has forced Washington to consider another choice: 'Shall the European continent be dominated tomorrow by Russia or Germany?' To vanquish Russia—according to the formula proposed by General McCloy—would only mean handing Europe over to the Germans."

That these same arguments are currently being set forth by the West German Communist party does not, of course, invalidate them. No one can feel comfortable about the rearming of Germany. But surely, if one looks at the facts, Carolus and del Vayo grossly exaggerate the danger of the present German militaristic threat, and, what is

more important, they flagrantly minimize the present danger of Russian aggression. Del Vayo barely mentions the armed police force in East Germany, and refers to "the supposed threat of Russian invasion." That the threat may be real is a possibility he and Carolus do not discuss.

ONE more article must be mentioned—"The War of Ideas," by Isaac Deutscher, a London journalist and the author of a controversial biography of Stalin. After quoting Sorel on the French Revolution, Deutscher asks, "Must the world now learn to see in the Russian Revolution also only a conqueror?" It is a surprising question for anyone to be asking in this period of history, and even more astonishing is Deutscher's reply in the negative. "Another decade or two of industrialization and education," he blandly says, "should give the Russian people so high a standard of living and so strong a sense of independence that they will have no use for Beria's concentration camps and spies, for *Pravda's* Byzantine language, and for an iron curtain." (How often one heard such words a decade or two ago!) "Democratic freedoms," Deutscher writes, "must of course be defended against the encroachments of Stalinism. But"—again the word is inevitable—"is not democracy imperceptibly being undermined and destroyed in its own name?"

Mr. Deutscher's logic is not always easy to follow, but I think he is saying something like this: Russia is currently a despotism, which is a bad thing, but the germ of revolutionary truth is in Russia just the same, and it will operate if the country is left in peace. On the other hand, the United States cannot organize itself to resist Russia without destroying democracy and allying itself with "international counterrevolution." He concludes: "it is the supreme duty of statesmen and leaders to explore every possible avenue toward a negotiated settlement." Now, if our statesmen entered upon negotiations with Russia with the assumptions in mind that I have just described, can anyone seriously doubt that the result would be

appeasement and a great upsurge of Russian aggression?

The articles I have been discussing are not only significant in themselves; they are also significant in their relation to other articles that are not open to the same objections. What Andrew Roth and Rayford Logan, for example, have to say about colonialism seems reasonable enough, but in the context set by the above articles it has the effect of adding one more item to a bill of indictment against the democracies. A Mexican journalist, Jesus Silva Herzog, writes a diatribe against war—"no international war has been good for any people"—that would merely seem old-fashioned and irrelevant if one read it elsewhere, but here becomes an argument for appeasement. James Warburg's criticisms of our containment policy, Vera Micheles Dean's plea for a bloc of neutral powers, even Grenville Clark's discussion of world government—all these acquire, in this setting, implications that are probably not what the authors had in mind. There is nothing sinister or subversive about this, and perhaps the editors did not consciously plan the effect they have achieved, but there it is, and it is a natural consequence of the bias I have described.

THE general line of this bias is in the direction of giving the Soviet Union the benefit of almost every doubt, and the United States the benefit of very little doubt at all. Pro-Soviet liberalism seems to most of us a contradiction in terms, but it is a fact. And it is a fact with a history that makes it understandable. However paradoxical it appears, the magazine that calls itself "America's leading liberal weekly since 1865," however noble its intention, in some sense serves today as an apologist for Soviet Russia. To some extent, no doubt, this is a matter of individual viewpoints, but it is also a product of tendencies that have existed in American liberalism for many years.

The *Nation* has indeed been a liberal weekly since the end of the Civil War, but it has represented several different varieties of liberalism: it was one thing under Edwin

Lawrence Godkin and another under Oswald Garrison Villard; it has become still another under Freda Kirchwey. Mr. Godkin's *Nation* need not much concern us. It could claim to be liberal, for Godkin was a disciple of John Stuart Mill and more intransigent than his master, but its brand of utilitarian, laissez-faire liberalism has never exerted much influence in this country, and Godkin, for all his brilliance and courage, had argued himself into a lonesome little corner before his death in 1902.

The *Nation* of Oswald Garrison Villard, however, is very much to the point. Mr. Villard took over in 1918, when the magazine had been moribund for a dozen years. Since he was an alert journalist and at the moment—largely because of his disapproval of American participation in World War I—a come-outer, a rebel, he opened the magazine to all those who quarreled with the status quo. In the midst of the hysteria that followed the armistice, when so much of the artificially induced hatred and fear of Germany and the Germans was released in a great witch hunt, when Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer was arresting thousands of "reds," when the state legislature of New York was expelling its duly elected Socialist members, when every strike was a Bolshevik uprising, the *Nation* became a great bulwark not merely of liberalism but of liberty itself.

Lewis Gannett, writing ten years ago in the more reminiscent and considerably less solemn issue with which the magazine observed its seventy-fifth birthday, told what Villard's *Nation* was like:

I doubt that there was ever such another journalistic heaven as was *The Nation* in the early post-war years. I came back from France that autumn of 1919 with one ambition in all the world: to land a job on Villard's *Nation*. I knew what I wanted, and was blissful when I got it: half-time at first, and small pay.

Those were rousing days on Vesey Street. Every week's issue was a new adventure. The country was still in a state of war shock: it was blockading Germans, seeing reds under every bed, crushing strikes in the name of freedom. And yet there was a breeze of hope

in the air, a stirring all around the world. . . . And there was exhilaration in fighting the whole wicked world.

Was there ever a day when the American press did quite as much lying? Even the "crusading" *New York World* waited until after the steel strike was crushed to tell a little truth about it; we on *The Nation* had fresh news, not printed in the big papers, almost every week. The *Times* and the other papers were killing off Lenin and Trotsky and crushing the Russian Revolution three times a week; we had our own reports. . . . It is almost impossible to believe today that a world could ever have seemed so full of hope—or so full of such sinister machinations as *The Nation* was privileged to expose, week after week.

There is further testimony, not as to the *Nation* but as to the mood of the postwar years, in the introduction that John Dos Passos wrote for the Modern Library edition of his *Three Soldiers*. That was a bitter book, and everyone had commented on its bitterness, but Dos Passos, looking back in 1932, knew that it was a hopeful book as well, that hope was what underlay its bitterness, and he wrote of the spring of 1919:

Any spring is a time of overturn, but then Lenin was alive, the Seattle general strike had seemed the beginning of the flood instead of the beginning of the ebb, Americans in Paris were groggy with theatre and painting and music; Picasso was to rebuild the eye, Stravinski was cramming the Russian steppes into our ears, currents of energy seemed breaking out everywhere as young guys climbed out of their uniforms, imperial America was all shiny with the new idea of Ritz, in every direction the countries of the world stretched out starving and angry, ready for anything turbulent and new, whenever you went to the movies you saw Charlie Chaplin.

THAT was what it was like in the years after the First World War. Academic communities were particularly susceptible to the mood of hopeful indignation, and at Harvard even an undergraduate from a respectable, Republican, middle-class family, an undergraduate who had to keep his eye mostly on the problem of financing his education, found that he was not immune. I joined the Harvard Liberal Club, and during one year—I think it was 1921-22, my junior year—I

ate lunch daily at the clubhouse. The president that year was an energetic fellow, and when he discovered that a prominent liberal was about to visit Cambridge or Boston, he offered him the hospitality of the clubhouse. They came, and they talked, two or three or four every week, and there were always some of us to listen. We listened to anarchists, Communists, socialists, single taxers, pacifists, to people who proposed to save the world by birth control or prison reform or workers' education or vegetarianism, to advocates of the Plumb plan, friends of Sacco and Vanzetti, foes of the Versailles Treaty, to admirers of Ramsay MacDonald, disciples of Mahatma Gandhi, enemies of Benito Mussolini. And as if that wasn't enough, I used to go to the Ford Hall forum on Sunday evenings and listen to the same kind of people—often, of course, the same people.

The theory of the president of the Liberal Club was that the members would be interested in hearing any kind of dissenter—anybody who was against the status quo. Not that we were incorrigibly serious-minded; on the contrary, we were, from the point of view of the Young Communists of a decade or so later, frivolous dilettantes. But we did feel that the status quo was dreadfully, excitingly wrong, while at the same time we had no doubt that all the multifarious wrongness could be remedied if people of good will would work a little harder at it. That the reforms proposed and the systems expounded were more often than not irreconcilable we had sense enough to realize, but we regarded the will as more important than the scheme, and we felt that somehow the best features of all the proposals could be combined, when the time was ripe, in one flawless formula for utopia.

It was some years later that I came across Ralph Waldo Emerson's account of the Convention of Friends of Universal Reform held at the Chardon Street Chapel in Boston in 1840: "Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Mugglestonians, Comeouters, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers—all came suc-

cessively to the top and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest."

IN MEMORY the 1920's seem to have been one grand, prolonged Chardon Street Chapel Convention of the fellowship of the enemies of the status quo. A few years after graduation from Harvard, when I was teaching at a college in western Massachusetts, I again saw the fellowship in action. There was a Sunday evening forum in town, and Scott Nearing came to praise Russia, John Haynes Holmes to denounce war, Norman Thomas to urge the next step toward socialism, Roger Baldwin to protest the latest outrage against civil liberty. We listened—instructors, students, and a handful of townspeople—and whether we agreed or not we had the comfortable feeling that all these eloquent advocates were on our side.

What we meant by the status quo included a lot more than politics and economics. Our quarrel was with the Philistines—the Babbitts, as Sinclair Lewis had taught us to call them—and anyone who would smite them was our ally. H. L. Mencken, with his constant and diverting warfare against the booboisie, was rather more of a hero in our eyes than, say, Robert LaFollette, for whom most of us had voted in 1924. We sympathized with the sober-sided pacifism of Devere Allen and Kirby Page, and we admired Powers Hapgood for casting his lot with the coal miners, but we got more excited about Judge Lindsey's views on companionate marriage and Bertrand Russell's program for sexual freedom. In 1921 Harold Stearns and thirty inquirers had published *Civilization in the United States*, which differed chiefly in its verbosity from the legendary volume on snakes in Ireland, and there were several similar collective analyses, including two that came out of the *Nation*—*Our Changing Morality* (1924) and *These United States* (1925). We welcomed them all.

Just as remarkable as the vociferousness of dissent was the inarticulateness of conservatism. There was plenty of flag-waving, plenty of bragging, plenty of abuse for the

knockers, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *American*, and other popular magazines, but criticisms of the status quo were seldom squarely met. I remember how diligently the director of our local forum sought for a conservative who would debate on capitalism or the national administration or any similar topic. Finally a publicist for one of the large manufacturers of electrical equipment consented to debate with Norman Thomas on public ownership of electric power. Obviously he was accustomed to entertaining Rotarians, Kiwanians, and the members of women's clubs with a pleasant little chat on the wonders of electricity, and hadn't known what he was letting himself in for. As soon as the main speeches had been finished, and before there could be rebuttal or questions, he announced that he had to catch a train and fled through the hall, with Mr. Thomas following him to the door and hurling statistics after him. Wiser proponents of the status quo let prosperity speak for itself, and it spoke loudly enough to drown out the talk about Teapot Dome, dollar diplomacy in Central America, the suppression of strikes, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the ineptness of Calvin Coolidge, and other unpleasant aspects of the 20's.

The dissenters were in a curious position. Along what might be called the cultural front they were winning constant victories, not merely in art and letters but also in morals. A fundamental sociological change had taken place, the rise to a new level of productivity and the shift to urbanism, and to a great extent the dissenters were merely calling attention to the implications of that change. And people were willing to listen because the time was ripe and also because they felt secure in their economic and political institutions. So the liberals were happy, because of their victories but perhaps also in part because of their defeats—because they could attack economic and political abuses to their heart's content without having to, or being able to, do anything.

IT WAS the heyday of the liberal weeklies. The *New Republic* had been founded in

1914 as a critical journal devoted to progressive democracy. Mr. Villard took over the *Nation* in 1918. (The *Freeman*, founded in 1920, lasted only four years, perhaps because it was more austere than the others, perhaps because it was less adequately subsidized.) Neither the *Nation* nor the *New Republic* had a large circulation in the 20's, but they were influential, and they deserved to be, for they were vigorous, well-written, exciting magazines. Bliven of the *New Republic* was a lively journalist, and Villard was a master hand at a jeremiad. Frank R. Kent, one of the wisest of political reporters, wrote for both magazines. Other good journalists were staff members or regular contributors, and there was always a newspaperman somewhere or other to produce a story on a strike or a political scandal or a lynching that the newspapers wouldn't touch. And the back of the book, either book, was likely to be even better than the front. The Van Dorens ran the *Nation's* book pages, with Joseph Wood Krutch as drama critic and a frequent contributor of literary pieces, and Lovett, Littell, and Wilson successively edited the book section of the *New Republic*. Anyone was likely to turn up as a book reviewer, from H. L. Mencken to T. S. Eliot, from E. M. Forster to Mike Gold; there were entertaining "middle" pieces on all kinds of topics; and the poems were by the good poets.

Although the *New Republic* never paid well and the *Nation* paid badly, they constantly published first-rate work both by people who were well known and by people who were going to be. Among writers in those days almost the only conservatives were the strictly commercial writers, and most of them weren't conservative in any philosophical sense; they were merely smug. If you weren't smug, you were glad, even proud, to write for the *Nation* and the *New Republic*. The magazines were, in short, the principal organs of the united front of the dissenting intellectuals, the fellowship of the enemies of the status quo, and they profited enormously from that fact.

That united front, of course, was shattered

by the impact of the great depression, but even before 1929 it had failed in its most significant test—the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Never had there been such unanimity of liberal opinion or such vehemence in its expression. Never, for that matter, had the liberals been more demonstrably in the right. Yet they were impotent. The issue was the status quo, and not only politicians and judges and college presidents but large numbers of ordinary and ordinarilly inert citizens were determined to show the troublemakers who was boss. It is the anguish of helplessness one hears in Heywood Broun's columns, and hears echoed in John Dos Passos' outcry in *The Big Money*: "all right we are two nations."

THE Sacco-Vanzetti case was important in another way: it brought the Communists into action as part of the united front. The alliance was not altogether happy, and the Communists were accused of attempting to dominate the Sacco-Vanzetti defense, of using the case for their own ends, and of following tactics that endangered the lives of the two anarchists. Even, however, when they granted that there was truth in these accusations, the liberal intellectuals continued to regard the Communists as inevitable, though sometimes uncomfortable, allies—as the more respectable reformers at the Chardon Street Chapel may have regarded the Groaners and the men with beards.

The whole problem of Communism was one that the fellowship of the enemies of the status quo didn't have to face up to in the 20's, and didn't. So far as Russia was concerned, most liberals wished the revolution well, and some were enthusiastic. If necessary, they could find easy ways to straddle: Communism was all right for Russia, but. . . . If, however, Russian shortcomings could be admitted, the enemies of the status quo—except for a handful of orthodox socialists, especially European socialists who had had some experience with the Bolsheviks—took it for granted that Russia was on their side, simply because the defenders of the status

quo feared and hated Russia with peculiar intensity.

American Communists, not very numerous and constantly preoccupied in this decade with factional battles, profited from the tolerance of Russia and the general tolerance of all forms of dissent. The Communists scorned—and in this period openly scorned—time-serving reformers and wishy-washy liberals, but the reformers and liberals could not scorn them and did not want to. Uncouth and dogmatic the Communists might be, but their opposition to the status quo was their ticket of admission to the united front. When the *New Masses* was founded in 1926, with a subsidy from the Garland Fund, it included on its executive board John Dos Passos, Paxton Hibben, Freda Kirchwey, James Rorty, and Rex Stout, and listed among its contributing editors Sherwood Anderson, Van Wyck Brooks, Stuart Chase, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Carl Sandburg, Upton Sinclair, and Edmund Wilson. Most of these people must have believed that the *New Masses* was going to be another organ of the united front, as the old *Masses* had in fact been. Actually, of course, the Communists controlled it, and it was purely an instrument of Communist propaganda, but, nevertheless, many of the liberal names remained on the masthead for a number of years.

ALL this reveals a naivety hard to credit at the present time, but even if the non-Communists had been considerably more alert than they were, the Communists would have been the beneficiaries of the disintegration of the liberal front that came in the early years of the depression. Day by day, as unemployment grew, it became apparent that something had to be done. We all know what was done: Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President, and he and his advisers, with the consent of a terrified Congress, introduced a variety of hastily contrived and often self-contradictory schemes, which saved the country. But in 1932 it was not apparent that Roosevelt had either the will or the

ability to save the country, and that is how it happened that fifty-two artists and writers signed a manifesto supporting the Communist candidate for president, William Z. Foster.

I have suggested that the liberalism of the 20's was indiscriminating and sometimes even silly, and its disintegration under the impact of the depression does point to the existence of serious weaknesses. But it had its good qualities, too, its hopefulness and its generosity of spirit, and its influence proved to be far stronger than most people would have guessed in the early 30's. After all, the New Deal was largely built out of the ideas of the dissenters and reformers of the preceding decade.

Many liberals of the 20's moved into the ranks of the New Deal, where they functioned more or less fruitfully. Many others, however, as I have said, were convinced that nothing less than drastic economic and social change would suffice, and these intransigents, with a few exceptions, turned to the Communists for leadership. "Nobody in the world," said Lincoln Steffens, who was one of the fifty-two signers of the Foster-Ford manifesto, "proposes anything basic and real except the Communists." Edmund Wilson, who in 1931 had urged American radicals and progressives to take Communism away from the Communists—"and take it without ambiguities or reservations, asserting emphatically that their ultimate goal is the ownership of the means of production by the government and an industrial rather than a regional representation"—was willing by 1932 to take the Communists along with Communism, and he, too, signed the Foster statement. John Dos Passos, also a signer, warned liberal intellectuals that the class war had begun, and organized committees to aid the Communist victims in that struggle.

That part of the story is familiar enough, and there is no need of going into it here. The point is simply that the united front against the status quo had collapsed because the status quo had collapsed, and the question was no longer what you were against but what you were for. The Communists

knew, had always known, what they were for, whereas no one else—or so it seemed to many besides Lincoln Steffens—did. Moreover, the Communists were doing something, and doing it with passion, violence, and complete self-sacrifice. They were fanatics, and fanaticism was what the desperateness of the times seemed to call for.

The incompatibility of liberalism, in any of the many meanings of the term, and Communism need not be argued. The Communists, in their more candid moments, have always boasted of it, and the liberal intellectuals who embraced Communism in the early 30's were quite consciously repudiating liberalism. They were finished with liberalism as an attitude—"To hell with the open minds," Steffens wrote Ella Winter—and they were finished with liberalism as a program of progress through reform. They were talking now in terms of drastic, radical change and of clear-cut, violent alternatives. Even John Chamberlain, whose fellow-traveling was distant and brief, wrote a book called *Farewell to Reform*. "The situation," he wrote, "looked upon with intelligence and considered as a long-range proposition, can lead to but one of two personal conclusions: it can make one either a cynic or a revolutionist."*

The old fellowship of the enemies of the status quo had been destroyed. From the point of view of those who had caught a revolutionary vision, particularly but not merely the Communists and their fellow-travelers, an individual was not automatically an ally because he was against the government or the capitalist system. The important question was what he proposed to do about capitalism, and if his proposals differed from yours, he was more to be reviled than a Union Club full of Wall Street bankers.

SUCH a situation at least promised a clarification, and if it had endured, perhaps a new liberalism would have defined itself,

*My own experience and involvement with the Communists is described in the essay, "Communism and the American Intellectuals," in the book, *Whose Revolution?* edited by I. D. Talmadge.

but history took a new turn and another united front came into existence, this time a united front against fascism. At home the New Deal had made revolution, at least for the time being, both impossible and unnecessary, and in any case capitalism as practiced in New Deal America seemed highly preferable to fascism. If, therefore, the Communists had adhered to revolutionary principles, they would have lost much of their liberal following. But they didn't: the exigencies of Soviet foreign policy sent them spinning through the united front into the people's front and the democratic front. Within the new fellowship of the enemies of fascism there was all the excitement of the 20's and an even more bustling activity.

If it is easy to forget the substantial virtues of the liberalism of the 20's, it is almost impossible to remember the values of the anti-fascist united front. Even the simple fact that the Communists and the fellow-travelers and the liberals were right in opposing fascism has been obscured by the silly, when not vicious, talk about "premature anti-fascists." As for the seriousness, the industry, and the self-sacrifice of many of the anti-fascists, they are recalled, often enough, only with embarrassment. Yet it is true that for a few years the majority of American radicals, progressives, liberals were working together and working effectively.

We prefer to forget that united front because it was contrived and used by the Communists and therefore fell apart at the moment that Molotov and Ribbentrop touched their pens to a piece of paper. Its major dogma had been the absolute wickedness of Germany; its minor, less emphasized but never forgotten assumption was the benevolence of Russia. Now opposites met, in the miraculous operation of the dialectic, and the result was not synthesis but chaos.

The question of the benevolence of Russia was crucial all through the period of the anti-fascist front. The Communists, after 1935, said less and less about the necessity for a revolution on the Russian model; socialism was still the ultimate goal, but it was to be achieved in some vague future and under

the aegis of Jefferson and Lincoln rather than Marx and Lenin. What mattered, the Communists said, was Russia's firm stand on our side, the anti-fascist side. More and more intellectuals, however, were skeptical about Russia's benevolence, and called attention to the purges that followed the assassination of Serge Kirov, the mockery of the trials, the slaughter of the Old Bolsheviks, the growing adulation of Stalin. Many of these critics found in Trotskyism a way of reconciling, for a time at least, intransigence and disillusionment. But for the majority, prior to August 23, 1939, the thought of Russia's anti-fascist role was enough to stifle doubts. As Louis Fischer and Vincent Sheean confessed after the pact, it even persuaded persons who were in Russia and could see what was happening to tell less than the truth.

Both the *Nation* and the *New Republic* had ridden the tide of the new united front, though both were affected by the growing dissatisfaction with Stalin's Russia and the *Nation* had its anti-Stalinist enclave. After the pact both magazines opened their pages as never before to critics of Russia. A new alliance of anti-fascist, anti-Communist liberals began to take shape, but it was inevitably submerged by the problems of the war, which took on a new urgency after the fall of France. And then history played another trick, making Russia not merely "our" ally but the official ally of the United States, and one saw how persistent had been the faith in Russia among the united fronters. From 1941 to 1945, when criticism of our ally was bad manners, the old belief in Russia as a special case grew stronger and stronger. How, as various writers repeatedly asked in the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, could we regard Communism as a failure when we saw how bravely the Russians fought at Stalingrad?

THUS pro-Soviet liberalism was given vitality enough to survive in the difficult atmosphere of the postwar years. There are, I suppose, three elements in the present pro-Soviet compound: the Communists, both

party members and close fellow-travelers; "leftist" liberals; and a sprinkling of deluded pacifists. Of the pacifists one can say simply, they are mistaken. For the Communists a case can be made but not in the terms they currently use, nor is it likely to convince many Americans since it rests on the assumption that Soviet imperialism is the chosen instrument of world revolution and on a willingness to equate what goes on in Russia with socialism. If the pro-Soviet front has any strength in America today, it is because there are still liberals who provide the verbal cloak of "social betterment" that hides the nakedness of the brutal revolutionary totalitarianism that is the Communist aim.

That the front still does have some strength, in spite of Soviet aggression, was demonstrated by Henry Wallace's campaign for the presidency and by the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held in New York two years ago. As one read the list of sponsors of the conference, one recognized the names of many of the faithful, but in addition to the faithful and in addition to those who might properly be described as gulls, there were the pro-Soviet liberals, dozens of them.

How many blows the pro-Soviet liberals have withstood—the trials, the pact, what happened in Czechoslovakia, what happened in Yugoslavia, what happened in Korea! They have been forced to yield ground: they no longer try to maintain that the Soviet Union is a utopia; they do not deny the existence of Russian aggression; they do not pretend to believe that Tito is the Wall Street agent the Cominform says he is; they usually refer with contempt to the American Communist party. And yet Russia remains for them on the right, the revolutionary ("progressive") side. The mistakes and shortcomings of the United States are pitilessly analyzed in the anniversary issue, as is customary in the *Nation* the year round, but Russia's faults and offenses, if they are not ignored or explained away, are made to seem of secondary importance in view of her revolutionary ("progressive") role.

The pro-Soviet liberals are probably not

altogether happy about their present position, but, when I try to imagine what they have to say to and for themselves, I can guess where they find comfort and strength. "At least," they must say, "we do not belong to the reactionary front. We are not engaged in persecuting government employees and school teachers and radio actresses, nor are we clamoring for atomic war. We have not enlisted under the banner of Senator McCarthy."

This defense has an air of plausibility, but, when one looks at it carefully, it is a further demonstration of how little the pro-Soviet liberals have learned. Certainly some (actually not many) of the ex-Communists and ex-fellow-travelers, as well as a lot of other people, seem to assume that nothing matters but the defeat of Communism and that all anti-Communists are their friends, but if the past two decades teach any lesson, it is that the wrongness of one extreme does not prove the rightness of the other. The pro-Soviet liberals are confirmed in their cause because they are against persecution, heresy hunting, and atomic warfare. In 1919 they—or, if they are under fifty, their ideological ancestors—denounced A. Mitchell Palmer and opposed Allied intervention in Russia. How, they ask, can they be wrong in denouncing Senator McCarthy and opposing preventive war? The answer is that on these scores they aren't wrong, but that doesn't make them right about much else.

The 20's asked what a man was against, not what he was for, and for the 20's that was a natural attitude. It was not an attitude, however, that encouraged discrimination. One was vaguely favorable to half-understood systems and schemes because they were opposed to the status quo, and it was in this sense that the liberals of the 20's were "for" Russia. The events of the past twenty years, however, have shown most people the need for more careful distinctions. We have seen how vulnerable the status quo is, and have learned the irresponsibility of its wholesale condemnation. For that matter, we have learned how vul-

nerable civilization is, how arduous the struggle to preserve it may be. And we have learned—many of us in its own sorry school—that Communism is not just another scheme, another idea. It is one of the real absolutes of our time, perhaps the only absolute, and by its nature, by virtue of what it has made of itself, it permits of no neutrality. The liquidation of neutrals is one of its specialties.

TO CALL Communism an absolute is, I realize, to invite an absolute anti-Communism, and the absolutists do exist and grow more numerous. That, however, is one of the chances that have to be taken in these constricted times. At least the assumptions of the absolute anti-Communists are in the open and can be openly examined and openly fought, whereas the assumptions of the pro-Soviet liberals are concealed—often, one suspects, from such liberals themselves. Self-deception, as I have been trying to say, is nothing new in the history of American liberalism, but today, when it serves so well the purposes of those for whom deception is a basic strategy, and when it effects such a profound corruption of thought and culture, it is a luxury we cannot afford.

The *Nation*, of course, is not of a single piece: by no means all of its political articles represent the pro-Soviet liberal point of view, and its book section is something else altogether. In its basic editorial policies, however, it tends to speak for a small segment of liberalism—small but not insignificant. One looks back with regret to the time when the *Nation* spoke for all the liberals and was a better magazine than it is today, but we cannot hold the *Nation* responsible for the fragmentation of liberalism. It happened, and we have to deal with the situation as best we can. The *Nation*—and, unhappily, it is not alone in this respect among "progressive" organs and organizations—has preserved what was weakest and blindest in the old liberalism, and has carried over attitudes that once were merely irresponsible but now are dangerous.